

Examining the Popularity of Yoshimoto Banana With Reference to the Historical Ties Between Italy and Japan

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Abstract

This article investigates the popularity of the contemporary Japanese writer Yoshimoto Banana abroad, especially in Italy. This has its own particular reasons. Italy was the first western country where she achieved immense popularity beyond her home country Japan. The article mulls over the notable developments and other key factors why Italy became the entry point of Yoshimoto Banana to international level of popularity supported with the historical references from the key incidents of historical contact between Japan and Italy. This includes description in travelogues as old as from thirteenth century by various notable historical figures who either came to Japan from Italy or vice versa. It further probes the appreciation received by Yoshimoto Banana through reception of various critical choice awards and an ever expanding fan base in Italy, which is rare for an author from Asian origin.

Keywords: Yoshimoto Banana, Italo-Japanese historical contact, literary reception, Bananamania

There is no doubt that Yoshimoto Banana is seen today as a celebrity novelist among the contemporary Japanese writers and more than that a popular literary figure with considerable fan following even beyond Japan owing to a much celebrated debut novel which instantaneously found its audience in various countries all over the world. More than the presented contents in her writings it is her style, simplicity and an eye for the details in the mundane life which struck the right note with the readership in the West and elsewhere, especially Italy where her works have found maximum translations. In this regard it is worth mentioning her success story with Italy exclusively.

To begin with, Italian (1991) was in fact the first language after Chinese (1989) in which Yoshimoto Banana's debut novel *Kitchen* (1988) was translated. It may here be observed that due to China's geographical and cultural proximity with Japan, the interest in Yoshimoto Banana in China could presumably be in any case apparent. But it must take some special interest and remarkable efforts in a distant country on a different continent to become the first country in the West to introduce Yoshimoto Banana's literary works to their translated literature scene and interestingly it was not the heavyweight English.

If we approach this case from a historical standpoint, Italy's fascination with Asia, in particular with Japan, is not recent and dates back to the 13th century. The Book Three of the autobiographical travelogue of famous Venetian explorer and writer Marco Polo's (1254-1324) *Book of the Marvels of the World* co-

written by Italian romance writer Rustichello da Pisa describes some coastal regions of the East including Japan. Even the country is known to the world by its Italian name Giappone¹ which otherwise is known as Nihon/ Nippon in its homeland. With Itō Mancio, head of the Tenshō embassy and the first Japanese diplomatic mission to Europe, Italy established strong ties with Japan already in the 15th century.

In his expansive article titled *Italian Influence in the “Naples of Japan” 1859-1941* on the historical relations between Japan and Italy, Earns (n. d.) discusses how Italian influence in Japan dates back to 1579 with the arrival of Jesuit priest Alessandro Valignano (1539-1606), who from 1582 to 1590 organized an embassy to Italy of four young Japanese Christians from Nagasaki area. The embassy returned from Italy with a printing press with movable type, hence leading to the introduction of state-of-the-art technology in printing of that era to Japan, which in itself was a watershed moment in the Japanese history. Valignano established the Jesuit Press in Nagasaki which worked together with the School of Fine Arts, founded by Giovanni Nicolao in 1591 in Amakusa, who taught European painting to Japanese. He also made musical instruments, bamboo organs and clocks there. Later, in 1614 Nicolao and his Japanese art students were deported to Macao in accordance with the Tokugawa proscription of Christianity. Another Italian priest Giovanni Sidotti (1668-1715) attempted to preach Catholicism by challenging the bakufu’s sakoku² policy by returning to Japan in 1708. Sidotti was captured while landing in the Ryukyu islands and was taken briefly to Nagasaki before being relocated to capital city of Edo, where in 1715 he died of exhaustion in his underground cell.

During the Meiji period (1868-1912) Japan expedited its modernization on the lines of Western European countries by hiring subject experts³ from these advanced countries, mostly from now unified Germany, United Kingdom, United States, France and Italy apropos the developed arts and sciences in their respective native countries. These foreign subject experts had the role of government advisors in Meiji Japan to give their suggestions to upgrade the prevailing infrastructure. Many Italians⁴ were invited to lead various public departments.

The Iwakura Mission⁵ arrived in Italy in 1873 and visited Florence, Naples, Venice and Rome, where it

¹The exonym was introduced to Europe by Marco Polo (French: *Japon*, German and English: *Japan*) through Italian *Giappone*, which originally who referred to the island country as Zipangu or Cipango in his autobiography *Il Milione* (Polo, c.1300, p. 155) when he learned about the abundance of gold present at the island nation (Masakatsu, 2008).

²Sakoku literary means “chained country” was an isolationist foreign policy of the Tokugawa shogunate which lasted for a period of 265 years during the Edo period, where the relations between Japan and West were severely restricted.

³The Japanese government during the Meiji period hired more than 3000 specialists called *oyatoi gaikokujin* (foreign advisors employed by the Japanese government) who came from western Europe and the USA. Despite the risk to their lives, they came over to Japan and transferred their knowledge in the fields of military, law, agriculture and medical science, among others (Watanabe, 2014).

⁴Renowned Italian advisors in Meiji Japan were Antonio Fontanesi for oil painting, Vincenzo Ragusa for sculpture, Albert Favre Zanuti for mechanical watchmaking. Alessandro Paternostro was the legal advisor to the Ministry of Justice from 1885 to 1890 and Major Scipione Braccialini taught ballistics from 1892 to 1893.

⁵In Meiji Japan two steps were taken to reinforce the Japanese state with regard to the advanced western nations. The first system was to invite professors and scientists from Germany, UK, USA etc to teach the basics of their accumulated knowledge to the Japanese students under support from the Meiji government. The second system was a Japanese diplomatic voyage between 1871 to 1873 to the United States and Europe called Iwakura Mission or Iwakura Embassy namesake of the ambassador Iwakura Tomomi who with his embassy circumnavigated the world eastwards for almost two years after setting out. The purpose of the sea voyage was negotiate on various treaties. The members were impressed by the scale of modernization and industrialization in the United States and Europe and gaining from their experiences abroad they recommended similar initiatives for the modernization of Japan.

was received by the King of Italy Victor Emmanuel II. The main interest in Italy was directed towards arts and the different aspects of modernization (Iwakura Roma, 1992; Nish, 1998). Earns (n. d.) shares another Italo-Japanese connection with Giacomo Puccini's opera 'Madam Butterfly' set in Nagasaki which was premiered at La Scala theater in Milan in 1904, which is an indication of Italian influence in Nagasaki, also called 'Naples of the Orient'. Today a statue of Puccini stands within the Glover Garden across the port of Nagasaki, which indicates the contribution of Italians to the city. Another notable Italian in Japan was Felice (Felix) Beato, whose photography of Nagasaki harbor and the foreign settlements in 1864 are among the most famous of early Western photographers.

Japan and Italy got into their modern manifestations in the same decade⁶ and through an alliance during both World Wars both of them happened to be together in the Western Bloc during the Cold War. All these historical developments helped to kindle interest among the Italian populace towards Japanese literature among other arts and thus paved the way for the literary works of Yoshimoto Banana to get a welcoming reception in Italy.

It is interesting to note that, Japan and Italy are culturally so disparate and contrasting that they unmistakably become the classic case of opposites attract. This is discernible in many common cultural aspects and even in conventional stereotypes⁷ of both nationalities. However, each had its presence on the other. Tripodi (2014) mentions in her article '*Italy and Japan – Opposites attract*', how Italy has shaped the imagination in the Japanese production and marketing sectors. It is therefore no coincidence that the most commercialized electronic game of all time made by Nintendo is marketed under an Italian name, with its Italian character – Mario. Same holds true for the Japanese automobile sector. There has been a strong Italian presence⁸ in the branding of cars by the Japanese automobile makers. She further emphasizes that:

Japan is a society commonly associated with efficiency, order, and restraint; while Italy is notorious for disorder, spontaneity, creativity and passion. Japan is a model of unusual social unity and consensus, while Italy is associated with division and contestation. ... Italy is a sphere of social unrest, individual passion, eccentric creativity and fiery pride, while Japan exhibits organization, cleanliness, efficiency and social unity. It would therefore be fitting to say that these countries could (and should) learn a lot from each other. (Tripodi, 2014)

The sociological and cultural differences and at the same time significant engagements between Japan and Italy facilitated an inclination towards each other. This is evident in the fact that even before the debut novel of Yoshimoto Banana *Kitchen* entered the Italian reading market, it was anticipated to be likable and a hit. On this credence an established and major publishing house Feltrinelli collaborated with Giorgio

⁶Meiji Restoration in Japan in 1868 and unification of Italy (*Risorgimento*) in 1861.

⁷In purely terms of stereotypes, Italians are often perceived as loud and expressive, using body language in abundance, being lazy and late, drinking coffee, having a Vespa scooter, are maniac drivers. On the other hand, common stereotypes of Japanese people are to be extremely polite at all times, being inexpressive and reserved, love singing at karaoke, venerate tea, eating whatever comes from the sea, extremely hardworking and diligent, among other things.

⁸It is observed that among other influences Italian does have an apparent stronger influence on the branding of the vehicles manufactured and marketed by the Japanese automobile firms. For example, Honda Brio (Italian for *liveliness*), Toyota Passo (Italian for *pace*), Toyota Avanza (Italian for *advance*, from *avanzato*), Nissan Murano (series of islands near Venice famous for glass making), Mitsubishi Strada (Italian for *street*), Suzuki Baleno (Italian for *lightening*) etc.

Amitrano to translate the novel.

In Italy, Giorgio Amitrano is considered to be a leading academic figure on oriental affairs. He is an orientalist, translator and an expert on Japanese language and literature and is currently affiliated with the University of Naples "L'Orientale", which also happens to be his alma mater. The university was founded in 1732 and is an authority on the Orient in Italy. Giorgio Amitrano also translates for other major contemporary Japanese authors, like Haruki Murakami, Yasunari Kawabata etc. Palmieri (2021) mentions him as the voice (“*il voce*”) of Murakami and Yoshimoto (in Italy). In an interview with Jean Derome (2016) he is mentioned as a bridge between Japan and Italy. With such a prominent translator for Yoshimoto Banana’s work, it is not a coincidence that her translations were foreordained to become popular among Italian readers. Her translated novels are exclusively published in Italy by Feltrinelli with Amitrano as translator.

The popularity of her literature in translations in Italy set the stage for many awards she received in the following years. She is recipient of the Scanno Prize (1993), the Fendissime Prize (1996), the Maschera d’argento Prize (1999), and the Capri Award (2011), the most she received in any foreign country outside her native Japan, which bespeaks her popular image and wide recognition in Italy. The impact of her debut novel in Italy was such that in the following year she was invited to Milan to launch the translation (1993) of N.P in Italian.

Furthermore, the number of translations of Yoshimoto Banana's novels in Italian from 1992 to 2022 surpass in English or in Chinese which is self-evident, what place Italy holds for Yoshimoto Banana. In an interview with fanpage.it (2019) she says that her relationship with Italian readers is unique, because [in Italy] readers are increasingly explicit in expressing ideas, feelings and opinions. And every time she goes back to Italy, she notices the amount of young readers who are passionate about her books, which she finds unique.

One may conclude that Italy had a considerable role in providing Yoshimoto’s literary career a steady platform for further translations. After the Italian success, her works were translated in over twenty countries which built up enough momentum to propel the phenomenon known as *Bananamania* to the further extent globally.

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